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THE OLD TESTAMENT THEORY OF ATONEMENT

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The abundant literature of this subject has recently been enriched by several treatises, of which the most important is the monograph of Herrmann.¹ This work is a distinct advance on its predecessors. Its exegesis is careful, and its theory of the order of the documents is sound. Nevertheless it does not make further discussion superfluous. The author is perhaps more influenced by traditional views than he himself realizes. He makes his theory too complicated by endeavoring to combine several elements. The matter is really more simple than he or any of his predecessors suppose. The present paper will endeavor to show the true state of the case.

The Hebrew verb **תָּמֹד**, usually translated "make atonement," occurs about a hundred times in the Old Testament, and nouns apparently derived from the same root occur about fifty times. It will be thought that we have here material enough for an induction. But on examination it is seen that by far the largest number of instances are in the priestly sections of the Pentateuch. Here, as is now generally recognized, the meaning is a technical one. But the technical meaning of liturgical terms is often remote from their original meaning, and to base our induction upon the priestly documents would be to begin at the wrong end. For a purely historical inquiry we must leave the ritual meaning out of view, at least at first. It may be needless to remark also that we should rid ourselves of any preconceptions which we may have got from the extensive dogmatic discussions over the idea of atonement. But it is fair to call attention to the fact of present consensus on one point. This is the point that our verb, so far as Hebrew usage is known to us, is denominative, and that any fruitful inquiry must begin with the noun **תָּמֹד**.

¹ Johannes Herrmann, *Die Idee der Sühne im Alten Testamente*, noticed in the *American Journal of Theology*, 1905, p. 747. See also Köberle, *Sünde und Gnade im religiösen Leben des Volkes Israel bis Christum*, noticed in this *Journal*, 1906, p. 140 ff., and Stade, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Band I.

Fortunately this noun is quite transparent in meaning. The earliest passage in which it occurs is decisive. This is a part of the ancient code of civil law, and commands that when a vicious bull kills a human being the owner is to be put to death, if he be aware of the disposition of the animal. The law, however, allows an alternative in these words: "But if a **כֹּפֶר** be laid upon him he shall give the ransom of his life, according to what is laid upon him."² We have here a well-known legal device by which one may escape the full penalty of his crime on payment of a blood-wit. It is evident that the guilt is regarded as a debt. The kin of the man who has been slain have a claim which normally would be settled by taking the life of the murderer. But they may be willing to take something else—to compromise the claim, as we say—and it is this which the law specifically allows. A later law forbids the taking of such a payment in case of manslaughter, the reason being that an asylum has been provided for such cases. But this passage confirms the meaning of the word. In fact, there can be no question on this point.

Now, it is of importance to notice that there is here no idea of substitution. The emphasis is on the payment of something of value in settlement of the claim. Euphemistically the thing given over might be spoken of as a gift, and it is as a gift that it has potency. In case a slave were the object transferred, as might well be the case, it is conceivable that the vengeance of the clan would be wreaked upon him. But even in this case, or in the slaying of an animal, the idea would be to make sacrifice to the manes of the dead man rather than to punish the murderer in the person of his substitute. In modern Arab custom the blood-wit is usually a certain number of camels. These become the property of the injured clan, and it is their property value which is had in view in the whole transaction. We have no reason to interpret the Hebrew view any differently. And that the Hebrew mind saw in the **כֹּפֶר** a gift is clear from those passages in which we give the word the meaning "bribe." Amos accuses the oppressive nobles of taking **כֹּפֶר**. We must suppose that they exacted gifts from their poor neighbors on some trumped-up charge of crime. Samuel in his repudiation of the charge

² Exod. 21:30.

of taking כְּפָר has some such procedure in mind, the judge easily becoming party to such oppression of the poor by the rich. Even the very late passage which speaks of the census tax as a כְּפָר shows that a money payment was intended by the word.³

Right here is the place to raise the question of the original meaning of the root from which this word is derived. Two hypotheses are advanced. One derives the noun from a verb meaning "to wipe off," a meaning which is still found in Syriac. The other assigns to the verb the meaning "to cover," supposedly based on Arabic analogies. As between the two there can be no doubt that the probabilities are in favor of the former. It is natural to speak of wiping out a debt, as our own usage testifies; not so to speak of covering it. And inquiry seems to show that the supposed Arabic analogy is precarious. The Arabic lexicons do, indeed, assert that *kafara* means "to cover." This is based on the statement of the Arabic lexicographers, and it may be thought bold to question their knowledge of their own language. But examination shows that they were conjecturing when they gave this as the root-meaning of the word. Their interest, as we see everywhere, was to account in the first place for the theological usage based on the Koran. In the Koran a *kafir* is an unbeliever, and the verb means simply "to be unbelieving." The lexicographers thought of the unbeliever as a hypocrite who hides his true thought in his heart. But this was not Mohammed's conception. To him the true believer was a man who followed the leadings of divine grace. The genuine desert parable of the man who is saved by following the right path was always with him, and to his mind the unbeliever was the man, who when he received signs by which he ought to be led aright, obliterated them so far as he was concerned; that is, who ignored them and deliberately chose some other path. Or, as it is put in some passages, the unbeliever is the man who is ungrateful. Having received the benefits which God gives, he refuses to let their impression remain on his heart; he erases them. If the original meaning of the verb had been "to cover," Mohammed would have betrayed his knowledge of this fact. But careful examination fails to show any instance in which this meaning is hinted at. On

³ Exod. 30:12. The other passages to which allusion has been made are Numb 35:31 f.; 1 Sam. 12:3; Amos 5:12.

the other hand, the infidels are said to be those who desire to extinguish the light of God, and who throw his book behind their back, as well as those who deny the truth or accuse it of falsehood. All these phrases indicate a process of obliterating that which ought to be plain rather than covering what is open to view.

The Koran word *kaffâra* is probably borrowed from Judaism, and we should be cautious of using it in our present inquiry. Yet it is interesting to note that Lane cannot define the word better than by saying that it is an action or quality which has the effect of effacing a wrong action or sin or crime. And some of the examples of the verb taken by the lexicographers from other sources than the Koran are equally instructive. It is said that the wind *kafjara* a footprint, and the scholars say that it covers the footprint with sand. But it should be clear that this is only half right. The wind effaces a footprint by filling in the depressions and by blowing away the elevations. The word we need for a good definition is not "cover, but "obliterate." Even more striking is the instance where the ashes of a deserted campfire are said to be *makjûr*. The wind, in this instance, certainly carries away rather than covers the ashes. Even where the lexicographers give their word the meaning "cover," they are obliged to add "in such a way as to destroy," showing that the main idea was that of obliteration.⁴

Since the noun means a payment or gift in settlement of a claim, the verb naturally means to make such a payment or gift. But as he who thus settles a claim appeases the anger of his enemy, the transition to the significance "appease" is almost a matter of course. A case in point is that of Jacob and Esau. The patriarch sends a lavish present, or rather series of presents, to his brother and says: "I will appease him with the present that goes before me; afterwards I will see his face."⁵ His expression is פָנָיו, אכפָרָה, and for our purpose it makes little difference whether we take the face to be equivalent to the person, or whether we think of it specifically as an angry face. To translate the word "cover" in this instance is par-

⁴ If this hypothesis is correct, Arabic usage was originally in line with Assyrian as well as Syriac. See Haupt, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1900, p. 61, and Zimmern in *Keilinschriften und Altes Testament*, ed. 3, p. 601.

⁵ Gen. 32:20.

ticularly unfortunate, because the passage itself intimates that the object of the present is to enable the giver to look with comfort upon the face of his brother. We are irresistibly reminded of another expression for the pacifying of anger, which describes the process as a *smoothing* of the face—smoothing away the frown is evidently in the mind of the speaker.

The transition to liturgical usage is made by thinking of any transgression of the rights of God as a debt which must be satisfied. The compensation is made most naturally by a gift. When the Philistines were convinced that they had made a mistake in subjecting the ark to humiliation, they consulted their priests to learn how to make compensation. On their advice reparation was made by golden votive offerings, and with these the ark was sent back.⁶ The incident is significant in more than one way. Most obviously it shows the spontaneous tendency to make reparation by a gift. But it also shows how the man in doubt as to a proper mode of reparation had recourse to the priests. The gift in this instance is not called a *kopher*, but an *asham*; but the idea is the same.

The whole series of sacrifices is looked at as a gift to God. This is obvious from the striking declaration that the guilt of Eli's house shall not be compensated (*ירחכפָּה*) by sacrifice or offering forever.⁷ It has often been remarked that the terms used here ("sacrifice" and "offering") are not the ones designating the sin-offerings of the Law, but the general ones used for bloody and unbloody offerings. Even the priestly legislation, although it lays an emphasis before unheard-of on sin-offerings, gives it as the object of all the offerings "to render the offerer acceptable before Yahweh." This is immediately explained by our verb—"to make *compensation* on his behalf." Farther on in the same passage we learn that the compensation or appeasement is effected by the offerings, because they are a satisfying savor to Yahweh.⁸ In view of this we have no hesitation in interpreting Ezekiel's directions in the same sense. In his new commonwealth he ordains that the prince shall see to the performance of the whole temple service "in order to appease on behalf of the people."

⁶ 1 Sam. 6: 1-18.

⁷ 1 Sam. 3:14.

⁸ Lev. 1:3, 4, 9.

It will be asked perhaps, with some surprise, whether it was thought by the authors or compilers of the priestly tradition that Yahweh was constantly in a frame of mind that needed appeasement. The answer to this question is, "Yes and no." The effect of the fall of Jerusalem was to emphasize the priestly tradition, and this tradition centered in the thought of sacred and profane as two opposed provinces. In one class was Yahweh and all that belonged to him; in the other was everything else, including all the things of daily life. To intrude what was not consecrated into the presence of Yahweh was to arouse his wrath. To be sure of acceptance with him, it was best to be on the safe side and placate him at every approach. His mind might be gracious toward his people, and yet the individual who came near might be in a state of defilement that would rouse his wrath. The anxiety of the post-exilic believer to be protected from unwitting sins shows how constant was the danger of giving offense, and it explains the desire to placate the divinity in all the ways prescribed by tradition. In the earlier time the priests seem to have had the power of exacting a fine in case a man came to the sanctuary in a state of ritual unfitness. This was now done away with, and definite regulations were formulated for all cases. Instead of the fines we have the sin-offerings and trespass-offerings. But the point of view is the same; all are payments in compensation of some supposed or suspected violation of the rights of Yahweh.

That it is the gift which is effectual in these cases, and not some substitutional or piacular taking of life, will be evident from one or two considerations. Even where the bloody offering is enjoined, the poor man is allowed to bring some flour as his gift, and its efficacy is described in the same terms as the efficacy of the sacrifice. Equally suggestive is the fact that an offering of incense is efficacious in appeasing the wrath of Yahweh. When the people murmured against Moses and Aaron in the affair of Korah, the anger of Yahweh was kindled and the plague broke out. At Moses' command Aaron took a censer, and when the incense was ignited the plague was stayed. Undoubtedly the main lesson of the story is the efficacy of the priestly mediation. But this does not hinder us from seeing that it is the pleasing gift which appeases the wrath. It is only one step

farther when the intercession of a chosen man effects the placation without gift or incense.⁹

It will be thought that the discussion so far has not done justice to the asserted efficacy of the blood in such a passage as the following: "Any man, of the house of Israel or of the clients who sojourn among you, who eats any blood—I will set my face against that soul, which eats blood, and will cut it off from the midst of its people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make appeasement for your lives; for the blood makes appeasement by virtue of the life therein." The primary object of the verses is to warn against eating blood. The reason given is that the blood is brought to the altar, and this in turn is accounted for by the value of the blood as containing the life. In other words, the author thinks the value of the gift determined by the fact that it is the gift of a life. But all this is a refinement of speculation not found in any other passage. Even this does not invalidate the contention that the sacrifice is first and last a gift. And if we go back to Hebrew antiquity, we shall find another reason for the employment of the blood on the altar, a reason which is indicated in some passages of the Old Testament. Another prohibition of eating blood is preserved to us, and this joins the fat and the blood. Now, the reason why the fat was not eaten was that it was the best part of the sacrifice and was reserved for Yahweh. It is easy to see that the prohibition of blood, found in close connection with the other, was originally based on the same reason. And that we might not be in doubt Ezekiel says in so many words that the food of Yahweh is fat and blood.¹⁰ This is in accord with primitive Semitic usage, in which the blood was poured upon the stone which was regarded as the dwelling of the god, or else allowed to run into a pit at its base, evidently as nourishment grateful to the divinity.

This shows that the blood is the chief gift, or the most valuable

⁹ As is the case in the incident of the golden calf. It is a mistake to suppose that Moses here offers himself as a sin-offering. His willingness to be blotted out of the book is the strongest expression of his love for his people, but it is not the cause of the change of mind on the part of Yahweh. See Exod. 32:11-14, 30-35; 33:11-17. The other examples cited are recorded in Numb. 16:41-48; Ezek. 45:17.

¹⁰ Ezek. 44:7; cf. Lev. 3:17; 17:10 f.

part of the gift, to Yahweh. When Ezekiel ordains that the blood be applied to the altar and to the doorposts of the new temple, we might suppose him thinking only of the assurance thus given that the sacrifice has been duly performed. But more careful consideration shows that we have here a point of view different from the one we have discovered heretofore. The emphasis of the distinction between sacred and profane gave new importance to those substances which traditionally had power to remove persons or things from one sphere to the other. Blood was one of these substances. Perhaps it was the blood of a sacrificial animal only that had this power; being itself sacred by the presentation of the animal to God, it was able to communicate the same quality to other things. Of its efficacy there can be no question. And when the dread of being ritually unclean became so marked a feature of the religious mind as was the case in Judaism, it was natural that the blood should be thought of as wiping off the defilement. We thus have a return to the primitive meaning of our verb. Blood was employed as a consecrating medium for the sanctuary, for the sacred vessels, for the people as a whole, for the priesthood, and for individuals who had lost their ritual purity.

It must be clear that there is in all this no question of sin in our sense of the word. When the leper is fortunately healed of his disease, he must be purified by the rite appointed for the purpose. No doubt the original idea was that he had been in the power of the demon of disease and could not come before Yahweh with that contagion upon him. The purification is accomplished by an offering of three lambs, fine flour, and oil. The blood of one of the lambs is applied to the right ear, right thumb, and right great toe of the convalescent. Some of the oil is applied in the same way. Both the blood and the oil owe their efficacy to the fact that they have been consecrated to Yahweh, a portion of both having been sprinkled before him. The demon of disease is banished by the sacred substances, or the marks of his possession are wiped off by them. The primitive idea is even more distinctly brought out by the case of an infected house. Here it is ordered that the priest bring two birds to a stream of running water. One of these is slain, and the other, after being dipped in the blood, is allowed to go free. The blood of the slain bird is

then sprinkled on the house. Here one idea is presented in two forms: the bird which is set free carries the contagion away; the blood sprinkled counteracts it. The obliteration of the uncleanness is the thing accomplished.¹¹ The verb *kipper*, which is used in both cases, has evidently come to mean "purify." What interests us here is that the purification is accomplished by application of the blood or of some other sacred substance to the infected person. The idea in thus applying it is exactly the same idea which lies at the basis of the sin-offering. This is clear if we compare the case of the woman who has given birth to a child. Here quite certainly there is no question of sin, in our sense of the term. So far from being a sinner, the woman has received special grace from God. Yet by tradition she is regarded as unclean; that is, she is not fit to approach the sanctuary without some rite which will remove the disability. The primitive idea was no doubt that she had been under the patronage of a divinity of fruitfulness whose worship was incompatible with that of Yahweh. But in the period in which the law was recorded for us this idea had long ceased to have any vitality. It had left only the conception of ritual unfitness. Hence the requirement of a sin-offering. This is offered by her, and the result is just the same as in the case of the leper. Here there is no direction to apply the blood to the person, but the significance of the rite is unmistakable—it purges away the contagion.¹²

As has already been indicated, the significance of our verb in these passages is not very remote from its earliest meaning. But the emphasis of the idea of purification made an important change, in that it brought a new subject into view. Where a debt was wiped out by a payment, the agent was the debtor. In cases where blood-money was paid we may suppose it often went through the hands of a mediator. The sacrifice at the sanctuary must be brought by the priest. Now the mediator may act for either party, and when emphasis came to be laid upon the efficacy of a purifying rite, the actual subject of the verb came to be regarded as Yahweh himself. This is clear from some passages in which we do not always appreciate the full meaning of the verb. Thus in the song of Moses

¹¹ Lev. 14:10-18, 49-53.

¹² Lev. 12:6-8.

it is said: "Shout aloud, ye nations, his people, for he avenges the blood of his servants; he repays his enemies with vengeance and purifies the land of his people."¹³ The idea is that the land is defiled by the innocent blood shed upon it. We are even tempted to see in this passage the original meaning "compensate," and to translate so here and in another case: "No compensation shall be made to the land for blood shed upon it, except by the blood of the one who shed it."¹⁴ But as in this case it is specifically asserted that the blood defiles the land, it is clear that the meaning is "purify." What interests us in the deuteronomistic passage is that Yahweh is the subject. It is he who purifies the land from its defilement. This is also the interpretation we must put on the prayer that he will *kapper* his people and lay no innocent blood upon them. This prayer comes in connection with the curious rite performed when a man has been murdered and the murderer is not known.¹⁵ In this case a heifer has its neck broken, probably to placate the spirit of the murdered man. But Yahweh must himself intervene if the stain upon the people is to be effectively wiped away. When Isaiah is terrified by the thought that he is a man of unclean lips, the live coal is applied to his lips and he is told that his sin is *purged away*.¹⁶

From this point of view we understand the following from Eze-
kiel: "And thou shalt be ashamed and shalt not be able to open thy mouth because of thy confusion when I purify thee for all that thou hast done."¹⁷ The adulterous Jerusalem who is here addressed has been guilty of all sorts of abominations which have defiled her so that she is unfit for approach to God. Before she can even present her prayer for forgiveness she needs to be cleansed, and this is what is promised. Yahweh will by his power intervene and remove the defilement. The phrase used in the passage is the same which describes the act by which the priest cleanses the people from ritual defilement. To translate our word in this place "forgive" is to give a turn to the verse quite foreign to the author's intention. And we may say the same of several passages in which we are tempted to make the word mean "forgive." To one brought up in ritual ideas cleansing is quite as important as forgiveness, and when the

¹³ Deut. 32:43.

¹⁵ Deut. 21:1-9.

¹⁷ Ezek. 16:63.

¹⁴ Numb. 35:33.

¹⁶ Isa. 6:7.

psalmists pray for the removal of that stain which is contracted by unwitting sins, they ask that God will purge the stain away.

The prayer for purification does not necessarily imply that the external rite was a condition essential to the divine grace. The psalmists certainly were conscious that the Spirit of God worketh when and where and how he pleaseth. The Chronicler, attached though he was to the ritual, conceived of Yahweh's making up by his grace for any ceremonial shortcomings. In his narrative Hezekiah prays for those who were not able to purify themselves for the Passover, in these words: "May the good Yahweh purify (יְכַפֵּר בַּעֲדָךְ) every one who sets his mind on seeking Yahweh, the God of his fathers."¹⁸ The phrase here used is the one employed both by Leviticus and by Ezekiel for the act of the priest in cleansing himself or the temple from ritual defilement. The Chronicler evidently believes that the purification may be effected by God himself without the use of external means. And in the few cases where our word is translated "forgive" or "pardon", the conception is the same. Purification is needed, but sacrifice and offering are not necessary means to this end.

The path along which we have traced our word seems to be a tolerably straight one. The verb means "to wipe out"; then "to compensate" for an injury by a payment of some kind; then "to appease" the anger of an offended person; lastly "to purify" from ritual defilement by the required offerings, or (where God is the subject) without these. There seems to be no case where the word may not be rendered in one of these ways.

¹⁸ 2 Chron. 30:18 f.; cf. Lev. 9:7; Ezek. 45:17.